



# Early effects of an early start: Evidence from lowering the school starting age in Poland

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## Abstract

This paper investigates some early outcomes of the reform to lower the school starting age in Poland. It explores data on the school performance of 6- and 7-year-old pupils, collected in the transitory period of the reform, when parents were welcomed to enroll their 6-year-old children in the first grade on a voluntary basis. The discovery is that older students do perform better at the end of first grade, but the separately measured effect of an early school start also seems to be beneficial. We point out a selection of unobservables as a possible explanation of the results obtained. The study concludes with some recommendations regarding educational policy and the implementation of politically difficult reforms.

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## 1. School entry age and the experience of early enrollment across countries

Many aspects of public education systems around the world are becoming increasingly unified. However, regulations regarding school entry age remain diverse, and are rarely changed by governments. Currently (2014/2015), most of the 37 countries listed in the Eurydice database have

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a school starting age equal to six (Eurydice 2013). This applies to 18 of the 28 EU countries, as well as to Norway, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, Montenegro, Serbia, and Turkey. However, in several countries – including Sweden, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Bulgaria – the typical school entry age is seven. In most of the United Kingdom (namely – in England, Scotland, and Wales) school starts at the age of five. The only country enrolling 4-year olds in the first grade is Northern Ireland.

## **2. Recent reforms lowering school entry age**

The lowering of school entry age is a difficult step for every government. School-enrollment is a milestone in each child's development, but starting too early may result in traumatic experiences which permanently affect a pupil's life in an adverse way. Many families take a rather conservative view on the issue of school admission, which makes any reform in this matter politically difficult. Changing the school starting age is also very challenging from an organizational point of view. For it temporarily increases the total student population by one full cohort, and this requires proportional adjustment in the number of teachers and classrooms, as well as in infrastructure. The classes enrolled in the year in which such change is introduced are expected to be larger and/or more numerous than usual. Last but certainly not least, there is important difficulty regarding the necessity to teach students of different ages within one grade.

The difficulties arising from political and organizational and other institutional reasons, explain why changes to school entry age, although debated in some countries, are rarely introduced. In many educational systems the age of compulsory enrollment has remained unchanged since the formation of these systems in the early 20th century. Germany for instance, in 1938 adopted the regulation in force in Prussia, stating that children reaching the age of 6 years on or before June 30th of a given year shall enroll in school during that year, with instruction beginning on Easter (Fertig and Kluge, 2005). Portugal lowered the school starting age from 7 to 6 following the profound education reform in 1973, when it increased the compulsory schooling duration to 8 years, established pre-school education, and strengthened higher education institutions. In Northern Ireland in turn, the compulsory age regulation was changed in 1989, when the entry age was lowered from 5 to 4 years of age. It was argued that children would benefit from spending more years at school (7 years at primary school and five at secondary school), and that an early start would be particularly beneficial for children from underprivileged families (NFER/EURYDICE). One of the most recent reforms took place in Romania, where school entry age was reduced from 7 to 6 starting with the school year 2003/2004.

Finally, in 2012 Turkey lowered the school starting age from 6 to 5.5 years of age. Since then children who turn 5.5 years old (66 months) before September 1st have been obliged to enroll to school in that year. Before the reform the cutoff age was 72 months. In 2012 around 4% of children who reached the cutoff age did not begin school due to insufficient mental readiness, as diagnosed by psychologists (Sert, 2014).

## **3. Lowering the school starting age in Poland – stylized facts**

The decision to lower the school starting age in Poland was made in late 2008. The Minister of Education and other members of the government expressed several arguments in support of this step. First, it was emphasized that, due to the better education of parents and stronger socialization, children develop their cognitive skills much earlier than in the past, and they achieve school readiness at a lower age. It was argued that Poland should follow the experience of highly

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